

## My Love Affair with English Sabine Atwell

My 40 some year love affair with learning languages in general and English in particular started a long time as a child. We lived in a multicultural family and community in Strasbourg, Alsace though that very concept did not exist at the time. My father was French / Alsatian with all of his family being speakers of French and my mother German and with all of her relatives speaking German. Beyond those two languages that I heard at home daily, we kids spoke the Alsatian dialect when playing with others kids in the street. Once I started elementary school, the main language was French which I learnt properly and in a very traditional way. German was our second language and we started to learn English as a foreign language in a very traditional grammar translation type method that was entirely focused on form, the ability to translate at the sentence level and read stories appropriate for that age level.

When I was 12 years old, my parents decided to move to W-Germany and I entered the German gymnasium (prep type high school-school). German became the language of instruction in all subjects. I also started to study Latin, which I studied with pleasure for 6 years. At the same time I studied English for 6 more years daily which was mandatory at that time for all German students in the gymnasium. As we moved through High school, we gradually moved from studying the forms and sentence structure of English in this grammar translation way to reading some of the easier pieces of literature in English. I particularly remember one year in which we were required to read many of the short stories by Hemingway in class translate them and discuss them in English. This was done in very analytical way, by looking up words we didn't know, by comparing the pieces to other pieces in the German literature, etc. None of this bothered me very much, quite on the contrary. I always had been an avid reader and thought these stories were very fascinating and I wanted to find out more about the country of the writer. Of course, America was far away and even though my family and I went abroad to Italy and other countries for our annual summer vacation, there was not much opportunity for encounters with English speaking peoples through travel.

However, another opportunity presented itself. At that time the U.S. Information Service Agency had established "America houses" in every major German City, in retrospect probably to make good democrats of the Germans. I started going to the one in Stuttgart. This "Amerikahaus" had a large library, offered lectures about all things American, showed American documentaries and movies, conducted open houses with guest lecturers and social occasions for young people. I quickly became a very steady customer there and my English improved rapidly, particularly pronunciation, and sociocultural factors, since there was a lot of opportunity to interact with Americans who I thought were fascinating and exotic creatures. Of course, all of this has to be understood against the backdrop of the fifties and very early sixties when the American influence in Europe or the world was not as pervasive as it is now.

I borrowed materials and read voraciously in English, magazines, newspapers, movie reviews and spent a lot of my time there over all of the years until I graduated from the gymnasium with the Abitur or the baccalaureate.

My mind was made up by then and I wanted to become an English teacher. My father however had other plans and wanted me to study medicine, which I did for two semesters to please him. The old dream of becoming an English teacher however was too strong and I decided to leave my medical studies and began to attend the University of Mainz where I studied “Amerikanistik” (American studies).

On one of my summer vacations to my hometown I went again to the Amerikahaus to check out some reading materials. That day I met my future husband there who was in the American military at the time. We started to go out, and to correspond for long periods of time when he was gone, all in English. We got married and left Europe in 1965 and moved to San Francisco. My husband was still in the service and had to work nights quite a lot. I started working at a complaint counter at Macys, my very first job that taught me a lot of language and many other aspects of American culture, attended the local community college to take the required courses for a BA and watched a lot of television in the evenings to learn more idiomatic English. I particularly remember watching the Johnny Carson late night Talk Show and learnt a lot of English from watching and listening to people from many walks of life.

I was still quite embarrassed in many social situations since everyone right away recognized that I had a German accent. I consciously decided to work on this accent and started to take “accent reduction” classes at S.F. State University focusing much on my pronunciation, fluency, pitch and intonation. I already had a pretty large vocabulary and good command of the structure of English. At S. F. State the teacher taped a printed text and then I taped the same text and we concentrated on sounds and sound combination that I had problems pronouncing. I worked quite hard in these classes as I had a real desire to simply blend into the American culture.

My husband left the military and started law school in S.F. It was the sixties. He was politically active and we went to many meetings, civil rights demonstrations and discussions. We also belonged to an encounter group where we “shared our feelings.” All of these activities and our circle of friends were wonderful for my acquiring more and a greater range of language. My husband, upon my request corrected my mistakes as I made them and my English improved steadily. I think this type of direct correction worked well for me.

In 1970 we moved to Reno, Nevada where my husband had gotten a job and I finished my undergraduate studies in German and French. By that time I had realized that other folks might make better English teachers than I and was eager to capitalize on my knowledge of foreign languages. I finished both my undergraduate and graduate degree. I also had a child and adopted another one. With our children and otherwise, we only spoke English at home, mostly due to the fact that my husband was a real monolingual without hope. After I finished my degree I worked as a lecturer at the University, taught and counseled students, dealt with colleagues, made presentations and participated in the

usual committees. I also became very active in Democratic Party politics of the state, which added another dimension to my language.

Upon the suggestion of an American colleague, I became a member of Toast Masters, an organization that works with people on their public speaking skills. I attended their meetings regularly and gradually lost my fear of making presentations. I must say that I have always been a very clinical observer of my own language development and that of others throughout this entire process and welcomed experiences that enriched my language development.

In 1979 I began working at the DLI as a teacher first and over my long career there I worked with faculty development issues, curriculum development and testing. I started to make presentations at conferences, supervised other employees formally in many different projects and gradually became more involved with committees to solve various institutional problems. I also worked as a consultant for ACTFL and belonged to various non-profit organizations. I read the professional FL literature and had to write quite a bit for work. I think during those years I finally became a L 4 speaker, the only skill I have been tested in though I do believe that I have equal skills in L2, but probably not in writing English.

No one identifies me any longer with any particular accent though I still have a slight accent but I feel fully integrated in American society and suffer few embarrassments and none that have to do with language. I believe that early and long-term classroom instruction by very dedicated teachers and a school system that had high standards were helpful in my early language development. However, without the great variety of experiences and exposures to various “worlds” over a long time, and a tendency to be a very promiscuous reader to this day, I don’t think I would have been able to achieve a high level of English language development.